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**Experience and meaning of unstable  
earning and low wages for young  
adults from poor families in  
Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa**

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# Experience and meaning of unstable earning and low wages for young adults from poor families in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa

## Abstract

*This paper provides an account of the experience of low wage intermittent employment among a cohort of young South African men and women, aged 25 to 35, in Khayelitsha, a mainly poor, Black African residential area of Cape Town. It explores the subjectivity of the individual vis-à-vis their domestic obligations and personal aspirations. The phenomena examined here are little studied, despite their centrality in the lives of several million young South African workers. This paper draws primarily on qualitative case study research conducted in 2016 that overall raises the question of what constitutes 'economy' and provides a critique of statistical employment and earning categories as a basis for understanding the economic and social life of young adults.*

*The study found a prevalence of voluntarily quitting without an alternative job to go to despite poverty at home, and episodic personal impoverishment and dependence on the household. This paper shows that it is precisely the economic fact of intermittent employment, with its low wages and variable income, which lays down the material and affective conditions for voluntary quitting employment and for participants' domestic social and economic life. Furthermore, voluntary quitting characterises high levels of churn in the South African labour market, indicating a wider economic impact. The research is framed analytically in terms of the notion of Polanyian 'embeddedness' of the economy, in this case, in the form of labour market conditions within the domestic moral economy (DME) of the household of the study group. This research adds to current scholarship a case study demonstrating that the extant structural conditions, of variable low wage and unreliable employment, 'metabolized' in individual workers in the fields of their domestic domain and peer milieu.*

# 1. Introduction

This paper is a contribution to understanding the experience of earning money among a cohort of 25 young adults of mixed gender, aged 25 to 35. These young adults live in Khayelitsha, a mainly poor, Black African residential area of Cape Town. When I spoke with this cohort, they were insufficiently skilled, and unable, to sustain regular employment, and there were too few jobs for young adults in their situation. They were unmarried parents of children, resident in their parents' homes, and intermittently dependent on household income.

This paper draws primarily on repeat semi-structured interviews and open-ended, biographic accounts — qualitative case study research — conducted in 2016. The research focused on how this experience of earning money related to mutuality and redistribution in their households — key dimensions of what Gregory terms the 'domestic moral economy'<sup>1</sup> (DME) (Gregory, 2012). Also, the research examined how this experience interacts with the young adults' aspirations for economic progress and with consumerist lifestyle pressures.

The phenomena examined here of the subjective experience of money earned are little documented and studied, despite their centrality in the lives of several million young South African workers. Employment status and earning are of central significance for these participants.

This paper is part of research that overall raises the question of what constitutes 'economy' and provides a critique of statistical employment and earning categories. The paper highlights the limitations of economic literature that generalises quantitatively the impacts of the labour market on social factors. The paper argues for complementary qualitative understanding of the experience of money — specifically, the impacts on and responses of domestic and social contexts of the poor.

The focus of this study is the working life of young adults, highlighting the experience and the subjectivity of the individuals vis-à-vis their domestic obligations and personal aspirations. This paper starts by providing an account of the experience of intermittent employment, and variable and interrupted earning. It explores the young adults' attitudes of anxiety and aspiration, and notes an anxiety of frustrated aspiration, that results from an aspirations gap between their lived experience and the life aspired to. And in this light, this paper interprets the evaluation of wages in relation to the irrationality of quitting employment voluntarily without having a job to go to.

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<sup>1</sup>'DME is that domain where profit and loss and virtue and vice form an inseparable whole; or, to use Polanyi's (1944: Chapter 4) famous formulation, where the economy is embedded in kinship and other social relations' (Gregory, 2012: 380).

The research is framed analytically in terms of the notion of Polanyian ‘embeddedness’ of the economy within social relations. In this case, the economy, in the form of labour market condition is embedded within the DME of the household of the study group. This research adds to current scholarship a case study demonstrating that the extant structural conditions, of variable low wage and unreliable employment, ‘metabolized’ in individual workers in the fields of their domestic domain and peer milieu. These fields ‘constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices [are what] we call moral economies’ (Palomera & Vetta, 2016: 414).

Theoretically, the research concludes that the DME, in metabolising the structural labour market conditions, situates monetary exchanges — reciprocal, (re)distributional and trade (Polanyi, 1957) — in a set of relational acts by which financial contributions embed generational and social reproductive themes that belong to both local and national economic contexts.

## **2. The Problem — Understanding a complicated experience**

In 2016, the young adults were all intermittently employed and counted as employed by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) if they were working part-time.<sup>2</sup> Not only was a significant portion of the young Black African<sup>3</sup> working population temporarily or casually employed but this portion was also increasing prior to the economic crisis brought about by the COVID pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, young adults in this situation often live in economically vulnerable households,

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<sup>2</sup>Employed persons, as defined by StatsSA ‘... are those who were engaged in market production activities in the week prior to the survey interview (even if only for one hour) ... Market production employment refers to those who: a) Worked for a wage, salary, commission, or payment in kind. b) Ran any kind of business, big or small, on their own, or with one or more partners. c) Helped without being paid in a business run by another household member’ ( Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2015: 2).

<sup>3</sup>‘Black African’ is a term used by StatsSA as a race category — Black and African. Reference to Black as distinct from African in South African economic empowerment legislation, for example, includes the African, Indian and Coloured populations.

<sup>4</sup>‘The results show that, among those employed on a contract of limited or unspecified duration, 10% lost their jobs whereas only 2% of those who were employed on a permanent basis moved out of employment between the two quarters. The retention rates among those with limited duration contracts were more than 60% between Q3: 2018 – Q4: 2018. The percentage of those who moved from limited duration contracts to permanent contracts declined from a high of 16.2% in 2013 to 12.9% in 2018. On the other hand, those who were employed on a limited duration contract and moved out of employment in the subsequent quarter ranged between 12% and 16% over the period 2013–2018.’ StatsSA, 2020. *Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa, 2018*. Retrieved from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-02-11-02/Report-02-11-022018.pdf>

which are at or near the poverty line and include other unemployed members who rely on them for contributions of cash or gifts of consumer goods. They also face consumerist pressure (and temptation) to conform to norms and standards of consumption that are financially demanding beyond their means. These pressures are, in turn, supported and made worse by small-scale borrowing and retail credit provision. Altogether, their predicament manifests in frustration at the lack of advancement and a prevalence of negative self-experience among the subjects. These feelings permeate this situation, over which they have little or no control, in which they are expected, as they expect themselves, to ‘advance’ despite the odds stacked against them.

This paper describes and analyses the study participants’ experiences of, including the effects of and attitudes attributable to, low wage employment and insufficient earnings in 2016. The paper prepares the way for an exposition, in working papers to follow, of demand sharing<sup>5</sup> in the DME of their households and the young adults’ experience of positional consumption in circumstances of debt and impoverishment.

Empirically, we observe that, while some of the participants in this study experienced relatively steady employment (albeit with low wages), nine of the 12 were intermittently employed for most of their working lives (meaning that their earnings were highly variable, even if always low). Despite this earnings-insecurity, in a context of high unemployment, this research found a prevalence among those in intermittent employment of voluntarily quitting without an alternative job to go to. This is associated with a sentiment that the particular work situation is not worth the effort; the person wants to work and needs a job, but they quit. According to conventional logic, this is not rational behaviour given the participants’ own aspirations for economic and social advancement. The key empirical question is, why then do they do it?

A brief answer given at the outset to orient the exposition identifies a myriad of complex, multivalent and even contradictory reasons why the young adults opt for quitting. This paper focuses specifically on the young adults’ emphasis on employment and their sentiment that the money is not enough. Consequently, it argues, and shows, that it is precisely the economic fact of intermittent employment, with its low wages and variable income, which lays down the material and affective conditions for voluntarily quitting employment, and for their domestic social and economic life. In short, they come away with so little at the end of the day that the effort of the workday and the cost of getting to and from work (taxis, buses, walking) is judged not worth the money earned. In

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<sup>5</sup>As formulated by Peterson (1993) in Widlok: ‘The underlying (implicit or explicit) demands that trigger sharing rely on cultural practices that are recognized as appropriate actions that make a difference, and are recognized by providers and takers but also by the bystanders for whom each act of sharing adds to the shared system of value’ (Widlok, 2013: 22).

some cases, then, they would choose unemployment for the prospect of a better paying job despite what this means for the household budget and for their place in it as a dependent rather than as a contributing member of the household.

This paper begins with a description and analysis of the experience of the study participants of moving into and out of employment from the moment of leaving school, and draws attention to some subjective emotional effects of low-wage intermittent employment. The data of their experiences of employment and earning is summarised in Table 1 below and shown graphically in Appendix A. The paper then enquires why study participants voluntarily quit employment without having another job to go to. Finally, it considers perceptions of subjective well-being, social comparison and aspiration, that are the motive effect of their behaviour. It concludes with a review of selected literature to contextualise and understand the findings about the experiences of the young adults.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Experience of intermittent employment and variable earning**

#### **3.1.1. Waiting for employment**

All of the study participants recognised education as a way out of poverty, and as necessary for economic and social progress. While all except one of the participants wished to further their education after high school, only seven of the 12 began a post-matric qualification, with four of the seven completing their chosen programme. For more than half the participants, the early period of their working lives after secondary school involved different kinds of short training courses and doing ‘piecework’ for pocket money before going into longer term, mostly contract, employment. Five cases cited lack of funds as the main reason for not pursuing studies, with one participant dropping out due to the effects of drug addiction. One participant, Siph<sup>6</sup>, did not want a post-matric or tertiary education. The period from completing secondary school education to becoming employed varied from a few months to four years, but was usually between one and two years. The experience of waiting for work starts after leaving school or technical college and continues, on and off, between jobs. Once employed, the participants would wait for contracts to be extended or for wages to be increased. Waiting for work, in anticipation and with hope, is the central affective condition of the young adults in the case study.

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<sup>6</sup> Note: the names of research participants have been changed for reasons of privacy.

*Table 1: Employment profile*

	Dumisa (m)	Fezile (m)	Temba (m)	Nomlanga (m)	Sipho (m)	Zintle (f)	Buhle (f)	Nobomi (f)	Tembeka (f)	Funeka (f)	Aphiwe (f)	Lulama (f)
Age	28	32	30	28	32	36	33	30	28	27	28	34
Total time in employment	6yrs 6mths	9yrs 3mths	11yrs	4yrs 8mths	4yrs 4mths	11yrs 3mths	7yrs 3mths	7yrs 6mths	3yrs 6mths	4yrs 6mths	4yrs 3mths	3yrs 6mths
Duration of working life (years)	11	15	12	11	8	15	15	10	11	6	6	6
Number of employers	5	3	3	5	3	5	6	4	4	5	4	Many
Number of periods of employment	5	3	5	7	7	6	6	4	4	5	4	6
Number of periods of employment > 1 year	2	1	2	1	1	4	3	3	1	2	2	0
Periods of unemployment < 6 months	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	0	Many	Many
Periods of unemployment > 6 months	0	0	1	5	5	3	4	2	4	1	1	2
Periods of unemployment of > 1 year	2	1	1	2	3	0	3	1	3	1	1	2
Self-employed/ enterprise	None	None	1	None	None	None	1	1	None	None	None	None
Proportion of working life in employment	59%	62%	92%	42%	53%	75%	48%	75%	33%	74%	71%	50%
Frequency of job change (months)	15,6	37,0	26,4	8,0	7,3	22,5	14,5	22,5	10,8	10,8	Many	Many



### 3.1.2 More regular employment

Three participants — Temba, Zintle and Nobomi — have experienced more regular employment, shorter periods between jobs and longer periods of employment than the other participants. The others have experienced longer periods of unemployment and a greater flux in and out of employment. Half have been in employment for more than 60% of their working lives, excluding short-term piecework in the initial post-matric period. This is a substantial factor when considering the prevailing high unemployment rates and the extent of temporary employment discussed later. Figures 1 to 3 below indicate the employment and wage history of the three research participants who have had more regular employment than the others have.

Among those who have been employed for more than 60% of their working lives is Temba who has worked for three employers during his 12-year working life. After a brief six-month post-matric break, he moved from one employer to another and from contract to contract, with one period of self-employment and one short period of unemployment. His experience does not fit the pattern of intermittent employment or volatile earnings. His nominal wages have, however, remained the same since he started earning in 2007 — a real wage decrease of approximately 6% per year (Figure 1).

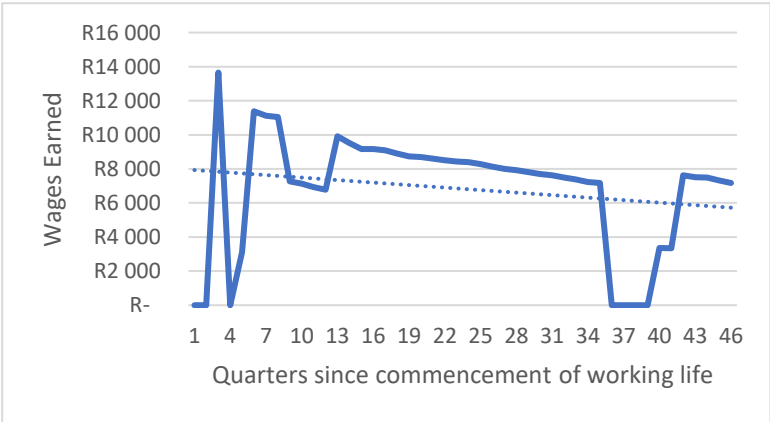
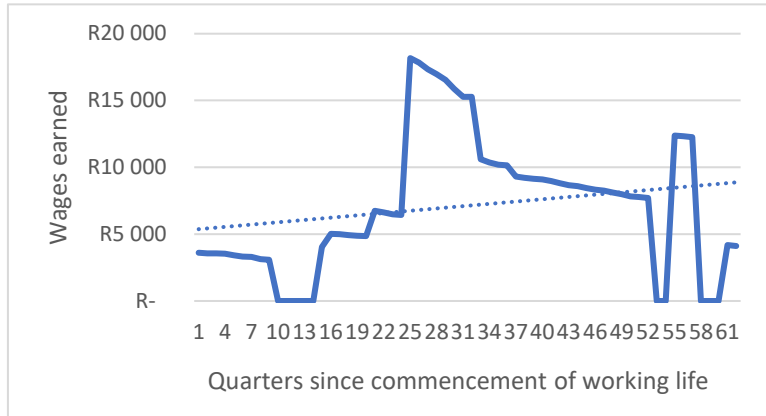


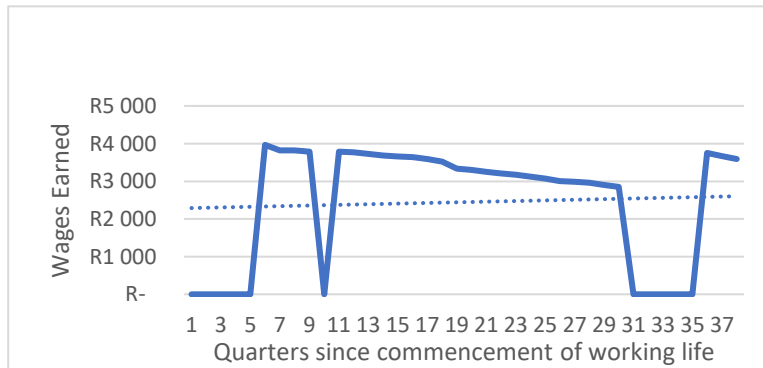
Figure 1: Temba's earnings trends since 2005

Following nearly four years of piecework, short courses and unemployment after leaving school, Zintle established herself in a career in environmental conservation. She, too, has been relatively steadily employed but her wages and length of employment fluctuated greatly with each employment contract (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Zintle's earnings trends since 2001*

Nobomi was employed relatively consistently for very nearly the same low wage from 2008 to 2015 (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: Nobomi's earnings trends since 2008*

Temba, Zintle and Nobomi may be borderline outliers in the sample, having experienced comparatively more reliable employment, for longer periods. Themba, Zintle and Nobomi are also among the older participants, together with Fezile and Dumisa (see Table 1 above). Coincidentally, the three have shared household incomes that are among the lowest in the group. There may well be a relationship between a tendency to remain employed and a comparatively low household income, but the study suggests that a more complex set of factors are involved.

Fezile, for example, worked for two years after school as a handyman and petrol attendant in casual employment, followed by five years with an industrial employer. He became intermittently employed after his dismissal in 2010, and by the end of 2015 was earning less than one third of his nominal wages (or one-fifth of his real wages in 2010). Dumisa has experienced two episodes of employment greater than one year in a working life of 11 years (see Table 1 above).

Funeka is among the younger participants and comes from a small family, including her elderly parents and her child. She has completed a tertiary diploma. Age and education level seem to indicate a tendency toward more stable employment and earning among the study group members.

In summary, the participants all actively sought employment after leaving school or college and have participated to different degrees in the labour market. Some, while stating a desire to work, have been unemployed for lengthy periods during which they would have been counted as discouraged workers,<sup>7</sup> or as non-searching, i.e., as not looking for employment.

### **3.1.3 Perception, its effects and the situation of churn**

The reported experiences of the study participants suggest several factors, including despondency and discouragement, determine whether they search for employment. The perception that a job is hardly worth the effort, given the low wages on offer, is one explanation for not seeking employment, but loss of employment is also a subjective cause of regret, and of discouragement and despondency. Fezile expressed remorse for what happened after his dismissal from his job at the state-owned freight company. He did not seek employment or start the business he wanted to with his R50,000 retrenchment package. Instead, he lived off it and, by his own admission, returned to ha bits of drink and revelry. Tembeka felt despondent and discouraged by her missed opportunity for tertiary education and the passing of time. She was unemployed for five consecutive years and only looked for work intermittently. Buhle did not hide her feelings of despondency during the unemployed parts of her working life.

Half of the research participants have been in waged employment for less than 60% of their working lives (see Table 1) and their predominant experience has been of flux in and out of employment. Further, analysis of the overall change of employment status reveals that, of a total of 62 instances of leaving employment, in 35% of cases the participants quit voluntarily. In a further 60% of instances, their contracts came to an end, while 5% involved retrenchment. All but one study participant (Fezile) had at one time or another left work without a job to go to. Six participants also said they accepted low wages to avoid idleness. Of these, Nomlanga reported an instance of accepting less in the hope that the job might become regular.

Aphiwe and Lulama's experiences highlight the acute frequency of interruption and changeability in employment that all the participants experienced. All but

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<sup>7</sup>A term used in labour market literature for those of working age who are not economically active, have been employed but are no longer looking for work as they have lost hope, or wanted to work but there were no jobs in the area or were unable to find work that required their skills.

one experienced a period of employment of more than one year and all but one experienced a period of unemployment of more than one year.

Measurement of the study participants' employment status using Ingle and Mlatsheni's (2017) National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS)<sup>8</sup> survey periods and methodology reveals that, over the six years from 2008 to 2015, three of the study participants were persistently employed, one was persistently unemployed and seven were in a situation of churn.<sup>9</sup> Overall, the enduring experience of employment and earning by this age cohort is of flux, i.e., of change and uncertainty in employment.

One effect of low wage irregular employment is quitting employment voluntarily, despite poverty at home. For the economy, the response of quitting employment voluntarily characterises labour market churn (Ingle & Mlatsheni, 2017; Kerr, 2018).

### **3.1.4 Employment and wage variability**

Three participants were employed by retailers and two worked in the financial services sector as debt collectors. Four were contracted in the construction industry — three men and one woman — and two men worked in the industrial sector. Five had jobs in the community and public sectors, with two active in political parties. All seven female and three of the five male research participants worked in semi-skilled operator and low skill 'elementary' occupations in the services sector. Two male and one female also worked as operators and 'elementary' workers in the manufacturing and construction sectors. They have all moved between unskilled and semi-skilled occupations in different segments of the services sector and some have moved between the services sector and the construction and manufacturing sectors.

An indication of the chronic flux in employment and earning became apparent soon after my discussions with the young adults in April 2016. Funeka secured a job on contract three months after her internship as a call centre operator for a bank, at R6,500 per month; this was double what she had earned at an NGO. Temba secured a short-term contract for R7,000 per month with an NGO; the contract was subsequently renewed twice. His wages were the same as those he earned from Lufthansa in 2007 after he completed school, and later at a woodworking factory. It took Fezile more than one year to get a job as a general worker in a factory, earning R3,500 per month; this was less than one third what he had earned in nominal terms in 2010. Three months after her internship, Aphiwe found a full-time job at Capfin, a micro-finance company, earning

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<sup>8</sup>NIDS is a panel survey conducted every two years since 2008.

<sup>9</sup>Churn is defined in this instance as employed and unemployed in two waves of the NIDS panel survey.

R5,000 plus a R1,200 incentive bonus. Like Funeka, she doubled her wages compared with her previous job. Zintle secured a part-time job at an environmental NGO after nine months of unemployment. She was employed for six months at R4,000 per month. In her case, she had earned more than double that in 2008.

Regarding wage levels, as at the end of 2015, six of the study participants showed a rising earnings trend and six a decline in earnings. The pattern in wages earned is one of change, from one job to the next. In half of the cases, wages declined in real terms throughout the working lives of these study participants. In the other half, wages increased. In all instances, disposable income either remained flat or fluctuated. It failed to match the steady increase in the cost of living. The trend in the inflation rate is noteworthy: it has increased by an average of 5.6% per annum since 2003. In January 2015, the average annual inflation rate was 6.6%.<sup>10</sup>

Fluctuating wage levels settled, and employment became more reliable for seven of the young adults over the five years between 2016 and 2021 when I interviewed them a second time. In this age cohort, 25 to 35, we see employment as central in the life course of the young adults. It enables their financial independence and provides a subjectivity of adulthood.

### **3.2 Attitude, anxiety and aspiration**

Understanding the attitudes of the study participants as predictors of their behaviour is central to understanding their behaviour as related to employment, that is, of quitting employment without a job to go to, in the context of domestic deprivation. Here we view the participants' attitudes as 'an evaluative integration of cognitions and affects experienced in relation to an object' (Crano & Prislin, 2006: 347). The attitude to low wage intermittent employment is voiced in the often-heard refrains 'the money is not enough' and 'work is sometimes not worth the money.' These refrains are expressions of dissatisfaction, and this study contends that they result from cognitive-affective reactions related to aspiration, i.e., that they express anxiety regarding the perceived distance between actual earnings and a normative desire for social and economic progress.

These attitudes set out below illustrate and demonstrate to some extent the character of the anxieties that manifest an 'aspirations gap' (Ray, 2003). The anxiety of frustrated aspiration manifests in statements of being 'held back' or

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<sup>10</sup>Food and non-alcoholic beverages increased by 11.4% year-on-year. Goods increased by 7.6%, services by 5.7% and transport by 6.7% year-on-year. StatsSA, 2017. *Statistical Release P0141: Consumer Price Index January 2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0141/P0141January2017.pdf>

‘left behind,’ of not having enough money for what they ‘want and need’ (Lulama).

### **3.2.1 Held back — The money is not enough**

Buhle and Temba describe the frustration of being ‘held back.’ They are both vocal about their economic progress being curtailed by family obligations. For them, ‘the money is not enough’ to meet the demands of their households, to purchase goods they feel they must have and to live a lifestyle they aspire to. This is an instance that links employment in transitional terms, as a progression toward a better life, to the function of obligation in the DME. Buhle and Temba have much in common at home, and most prominent are the vocal demands by their mothers for financial contributions. Their aspirations are high, as are the demands on their earnings. The difference is that Buhle experienced volatile earning while Temba was the most regular earner overall.

Buhle completed in-service training in 2001. When her contract came to an end, she went back to college. She failed some of her classes and her state education aid was withdrawn. She dropped out of college because, she explains, there was not enough money in the family to support her, but there were also ‘problems at home’ which made her worry.

My mum was no longer taking good care of herself; she will not bath and will let the house be dirty. I was living at East London [at the time] but I noticed something is wrong and leaving her behind, you know, going back to school aware that she's not well — it kind of affected me. She was not working and there was no source of income for her...even like no food...I came back [to Cape Town] in 2003 with the hope that I will find a job.

In this instance, education, perceived by Buhle as a means to employment and financial advancement, is frustrated by the conditions at home, including familial obligation. After Buhle returned to Cape Town, she was out of work for three years before securing employment again. She then worked for Shoprite supermarkets for almost two years before being retrenched. In 2009 she went back to the Eastern Cape to take up a well-paying job with a construction firm on a one-year contract, followed by another year in 2010. ‘Things got better,’ she explains. She was able to save money and started helping her mother with the renovation of her house, which was an enduring theme in their relationship. When the contract came to an end, Buhle stayed in the Eastern Cape hoping for another job, not wanting to return home to Cape Town, and afraid she would end up sitting around doing nothing, as she had between 2003 and 2005. The fear of idleness was a fear of destitution; there is some shame in it, but mostly she experienced anxiety about progress and independence, and about not being able to take care of herself at her age.

My mum will call me even when I'm in Eastern Cape — ‘you know, I cannot be taking care of your child and you at the same time.’ And that will frustrate me. That's mostly what we are fighting about; me not being able to take care of myself at my age.

Throughout her working life, the difficulty of finding regular employment, its intermittent and unreliable character, and the interplay between this and the state of household finances marked her experience of earning. Life was laden with feelings of obligation toward her mother and by her mother's demands for financial contributions toward household expenses, which frustrated her quest for upward mobility by securing an education. By her own reckoning, she earned a good wage during periods of regular employment, but the money was not enough to cover her whole set of payments: her obligations at home, her own needs and debt repayments.

When I was working, I had to buy a microwave, a washing machine ... I felt a pressure that I should because she was complaining about washing the clothes, that she is and stuff like that. I had to make sure that whatever cent I've got I sacrifice. She wanted a ceiling because there was none at home; I thought like ‘ag I'm going to put my foot down.’

Buhle refers to her contribution as a sacrifice, presumably of money she could have used for herself. Her comments suggest resentment for the moral pressure she feels, but her feelings of obligation run deep. She has depended on her mother to look after her child and to provide financial support during failed attempts at achieving her ambition of completing a diploma. The conversations with the women participants suggest that purchase of household items occurs not only out of feelings of obligation but also for reasons of care and for raising the household's social standing in the neighbourhood.

These entanglements of domestic relationships, of obligation and care, of entitlement and familial responsibility, accompany expressions of frustration by Temba and, to a lesser extent, by Nobomi, at being held back. To a greater or lesser degree, they exemplify a common tension where young adults are bound to household obligation due to the uncertainty of their employment status.

Temba's earnings have been far less volatile than Buhle's or any other member of the study group. He has been steadily employed, mostly with the same employer, though his earnings have remained the same in nominal terms throughout his working life and have therefore declined in real terms. He, too, feels the moral pressure to provide. He lives in a caravan<sup>11</sup> in his mother's

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<sup>11</sup>A mobile trailer home.

backyard, with his mother and two younger sisters living in the house. His mother is a seamstress working from home and, by Temba's reckoning, earns around R200 per month. One of his sisters is studying and the other is intermittently employed and contributes to household expenses when employed. They therefore depend on Temba's financial contributions and, while the most regularly employed, he is also the most vocal of the participants about family demands.

There's a lot of pressure you know, there's a lot of pressure. One sister is working but for a very minimum wage. My younger sister was doing her education. At the moment, they are both not working. They live with me, so at the end of the month the eyes are [wide] because I've got my money. You know when you walk in ... you can't just walk in there with nothing. They always expect you to bring something home.

Temba expresses resentment. The moral pressure he feels is symbolised by the wide eyes of expectation of his sisters and mother. His comments point to what he perceives as an unavoidable predicament, of having to provide not only for his own needs but also for the household, and he feels held back by these circumstances. Temba's story starts with an educational opportunity rare among Black children from poor homes. He was selected at a young age for a bursary to study at the German International School in Cape Town<sup>12</sup> due to his talent for maths. He lived in the school hostel and visited his family in Khayelitsha on weekends. However split he may have been between the lifeworld of his family and that of the more affluent classmates at his school, his aspirational window would have been set wide by his years at the school. According to Ray, such a window is formed from an individual's cognitive world which is composed of 'similar, attainable individuals' (2003:1).

Temba procrastinated and missed the university application deadline in 2005 so went to work at a school friend's father's woodworking factory in early 2006, starting at the bottom sweeping the factory floor and packing wood. As he recalls: 'It was fine, better than sitting at home now in Khayelitsha and doing nothing.' Already he aspired for more. This unsolicited phrase expressed in different ways by five other study participants also displays an attitude of avoidance of idleness discussed later in relation to reservation wages and perceptions of relative well-being. It involves a reaction to boredom at home, in which the benefits of going to work, regardless of the quantum earned, outweigh the boredom of idleness. Nevertheless, Temba also did quit work once without a job to go to, reporting dissatisfaction with the pay and the racism of his employer. While Temba's wages dropped in value over time, they were still

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<sup>12</sup>He attended the German School from grades 8–12.



higher and more reliable than the earnings of his peers. He stayed employed because he had a special relationship with his employer who had paid for him to go to college. During that period, he would work in the factory on weekends: ‘so that was perfect because I could be making money and furthering my studies.’ He values the benefits of earning, which allow him to provide financial support to his mother and sisters, though somewhat reluctantly it seems.

It is thus evident that responsibility for the well-being of the family plays a significant part in the financial lives of the research participants. Buhle and Temba directly expressed sentiments of discontent or even resentment at being held back by family obligations, with Temba saying his wages are half of what is needed for ‘a good life or just a normal life.’ Yet he continued to provide financial support to his family. Dumisa also claimed to be under immense pressure and, although he did not express feelings of being held back, this is implied in his account of his situation. When he was 10 years old, he came to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape with his mother and siblings to join their father who was working as a domestic gardener. Life was tough compared with others in the neighbourhood:

I never noticed anything in terms of how much money my father had, how poor or who or how rich our family was — up until I was at the age of 15 ... because some other families they have got a car, you see, they have nice furniture inside the house. They are eating nice food and all that you see, and only [because the] father’s working for bigger companies, etc.

It is interesting to note the items of social comparison: a vehicle, good furniture, better food. Cognition of relative well-being is linked to employment status and relatively better earnings. Temba made a similar comment of social comparison when he compared his consumption opportunities to those of a friend whose parents were better off than his own.

When Dumisa was close to finishing secondary school, his father passed away and he was plunged into the world of work and earning as he and his five siblings could not survive on his mother’s income from cooking and selling meat on the street. He recalls that ‘it was difficult because now the whole family was looking up to me to provide, you see, food; we were seven family members.’ Soon after his father’s death, his mother went to the Eastern Cape and four of the siblings stayed with him in Cape Town. He sent money to his mother regularly to support the rest of the family. He endured this responsibility but, he explains, the money was not enough. He reports that there was nothing left for him. The measure of sufficiency is personal. He reports:

[I] became stressed because at payday I remained with nothing, with no money. All the money, certain percentage [went to] buy

food for my family, clothes for my younger brother and so on, you see, so again, I decided that this is not enough money that I'm getting here, let me try to do another training.

Dumisa had five periods of employment with five employers. Three of these were for longer than one year in his working life of 11 years, during six of which he was employed. He voluntarily quit employment three times without having a job to go to. The sentiment he repeatedly emphasised was that the money he earned was not enough for his own needs. Ultimately Dumisa pondered the same point as Temba regarding his family obligations, asking what was left for him after a month's work. His actions imply an impatience for improvement and an aspiration for more, for himself and his family.

In summary, aspirations for personal financial improvement in these three lives were frustrated by family obligation. While the three participants complained about the demands on their earnings, they continued to provide for their households. They vocalised the frustration they felt while they were the sole providers in their households. Perhaps their complaints also relate to not being able, when unemployed, to claim the same support from other members of the household. In addition, frustrated aspiration is expressed in the feelings of being 'left behind' compared to the advancement they observe in others around them. In these cases, the sentiments appear to express a personal responsibility for their absence of progress as well as for their failure to provide for their family, or for being dependent on their family.

### **3.2.2 Left behind, a negative self-perception**

Zintle expresses concern about her financial status but does not attribute her insecurity and lack of economic progress to an obligation to support her family. She earned well between 2007 and 2010, and again in 2014 and 2015. During these periods she borrowed money and bought on credit for herself, for her family and the family home. Then her salary dropped by half. She was earning just enough for her personal expenses, food, shelter and the regular contributions to her mother for household expenses where her children stay. She worries about getting on in life, about lost opportunities and the absence of prospects, about her lack of achievement and about financial insecurity. Like Buhle who is the other older woman among the participants, Zintle feels she has not advanced as she should have at her age. She commented more recently (February 2017) with concern:

I am turning the big 40 in two years' time, and I have no job security. I have not secured anything like investments, and I have two kids in school. Besides them I have a family to take care of. I feel I have failed myself. I juggle part-time work, part-time study and part-time motherhood. I feel I have had my hand on too

many things and have not succeeded in anything. I look at my future and I get very scared.

While Buhle feels the pressure of failure from her mother, Zintle feels she has failed herself. Tembeka is 30, more than five years younger than Zintle and Buhle, yet she, too, worries that time has passed and she has not yet achieved any measure of financial independence. Tembeka is among the least employed of the participants. After she dropped out of Walter Sisulu University (Buffalo City Campus) in the Eastern Cape, she moved to Cape Town to help her ailing grandmother. She missed registration at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and her family ran out of money to pay for her studies. In her thinking, she missed her opportunity for an education and allowed herself to be left behind. She still depends on her father and worries about his debt burden and the financial stress he faces. She feels obligated, cares for his well-being, and expresses a wish to earn and assist him financially. For Tembeka, Buhle and Zintle, economic mobility is suspended in relation to where they feel they should be at this stage of their lives. The transition is delayed, in stasis, waiting. They are anxious about the passing of time, and about being left behind, and they feel personally responsible for their predicament.

### **3.2.3 An aspiration gap**

Being held back or left behind is suggestive of a gap in time or a distance to the life aspired to; and of a delay in transition to an institutionally standardised and legally recognised adulthood (Kohli & Meyer, 1986; Mayer & Müller, 1986). Ray (2003) refers to an aspirational gap as the perceived distance between one's material reality (personal and social) and the things or lifestyle aspired to. He argues that if the gap is perceived to be too wide then the individual may become despondent and give up trying.

In this study, the perception of there not being enough money from wages is common, and from time to time appears to stretch the patience of the young adults to breaking point. In this context, quitting employment voluntarily could reflect a temporary despondency involving negative perceptions of the challenge of meeting the demands of material reality and achieving the better life aspired to. While this may be so, the attitudes of the participants affirm that aspiration is never permanently abandoned. Leaving a job without having another to go to may be a tactical move of risk, a gesture toward seeking improvement through finding a better paying job. Or it may reflect a wish to avoid effort for too little remuneration to make the effort worthwhile. This situation generates a question as to whether the study participants have a threshold of earning below which the effort is not worth the money earned: a so-called 'reservation wage'.

Thus far we have described the experience of intermittent low wage employment and variable earning. We have also examined its subjective effects

on the young adults, including their attitudes and feelings. We find aspiration, as a forward-looking driving force, expressed in sentiments of being held back and left behind, that the money is not enough, and that work is not worth the effort. If money earned is valued, why is it sometimes considered not worth the effort? In answer to this question, the narratives of Temba and Nomlanga illustrate the sentiment expressed by all of the participants that there is a gap between what they consider necessary for a ‘good life or just a normal life’ and the wages they will accept.

### **3.3 The evaluation of wages**

The evaluation of wages is normative and aspirational, but wages accepted are evaluated against the alternative of ‘staying at home and doing nothing.’ Temba speaks emphatically about what he regards to be enough money:

It doesn't work...giving a piece of whatever you have to relatives. The piece that you have is usually not enough for yourself. I talk about the salary. Average people are usually getting about R4,000 or R5,000, that's what is happening, [that is] the average salary. Now for you to have a good life or just a normal life, you need to get about R9,000 or R10,000 — so in terms of salary you [need] R10,000.

Money needed for a ‘normal life’, implying money to make ends meet for his own needs and satisfy the needs of his family, is twice what is earned as the average wage. Yet Temba remained with the same employer for nearly eight years at the same wage of R7,000 per month. This implies a positive valuation of continuity and certainty in earning. Nomlanga, on the other hand, is happy with R4,500 as a necessary minimum monthly income. ‘Never less than that,’ he says, but he accepts what he can get. He can make do, but it is important that no one know he is earning low wages.

Nomlanga completed Grade 11 in 2005 and went to technical college to do an electrical engineering certificate in 2006, but did not complete the course. During 2007 he was mostly unemployed; he earned some cash washing taxis for small change and developed a drug habit. In September of that year, he started working as a petrol attendant where he stayed for a year earning a nominal wage plus R200 per day in tips. He walked out after a drug-induced argument with a fellow worker. He spent nine months in jail in 2009 for burglary, and in April 2010 he was hired as an intern, and worked for two years and three months on a series of short contracts with the Public Works maintenance department. Nomlanga considers an internship as ‘just another job’. The wages were low, according to him, but he hoped he would be employed in a position and earn more.

I have been an intern for two years three months; in 2012 and in 2013...they say they extended [the one-year contract] by three months [but] it was for 15 months. It started at R1,200 a month...then they increased it to R1,500, [and in the] last year and three months it was R1,900. It is not much. For me it is not a lot, it is nothing, [but] it is good money because I work with it nicely and nobody can tell that I am getting only R1,900.

After four months of unemployment in 2013, Nomlanga had two consecutive six-month construction jobs. First, he did maintenance work on public buildings for an outsource company to the Public Works Department and was paid between R150 and R250 per day. He incurred considerable travel costs between Khayelitsha to Simonstown each day, in the region of R50 per day. The second job was with a road maintenance firm where he earned R4,000 per month as a flagman. Nomlanga experienced a total of four years and eight months of wage-earning employment during 11 years of working life.

When I was getting R4,000 that was all right. I had no complaints, nothing, because I would do everything and the [next] month maybe by the 20<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> my money would [finish] and then I would borrow from my mother R200 just for two weeks, and when I get paid, I would give her back. You see then at least R4,000 is all right.

It is also noteworthy that Nomlanga was dependent on his mother, who earned a regular salary, for small loans to meet the shortfall in his wages. It shows a generosity on her part and dependency on his. The ability to borrow from family to make ends meet may explain his attitude expressed above toward low wages. This procedure of mutuality between the dependent young adult and the head of household, his employed mother, analytically links a forward-looking aspirational drive in the period of transition to adulthood to a supportive DME, as represented by the employed head of household.

Nomlanga, Dumisa, Aphiwe, Lulama, Nobomi and Temba have all explained their acceptance of a wage less than what they consider a necessary minimum because, as Temba put it, 'it is better than staying at home and doing nothing.' This appears to be at odds with claims by the same study participants that work (i.e., wages earned) is sometimes not worth the effort. But wages not being worth the effort is a normative aspirational claim. Acceptance of wages below the wages aspired to also tests the view that their quitting of employment or reluctance to accept low wage work is an indication of idleness. They take the jobs they can get but wages received are sometimes simply too low and not worth the effort. For comparison, the minimum wage paid in the wholesale and

retail sectors in Cape Town in 2015 lay in a range between R2,850 per month for a security guard and R5,900 for an assistant manager.<sup>13</sup>

The minimum wage below which workers will notionally choose unemployment is referred to as a threshold of earning or ‘reservation’ wage — see Lilenstein and Seekings (2017). They argue that self-reported reservation wages<sup>14</sup> may be more a reflection of aspiration and less about what is accepted, and that young adults in Cape Town will accept far lower wages than self-reported reservation wages. Young adults accept wages that are nearer to what Lilenstein and Seekings refer to as ‘revealed reservation wages’ (Lilenstein & Seekings, 2017: 38) which are based on hypothetical job offers to research respondents. These authors argue that only a small proportion of young adults have ‘unrealistic reservation wages’ (Lilenstein & Seekings, 2017: 38).

The findings of the present case study are consistent with this. Wages of aspiration are as much as R9,000 to R10,000 per month, as indicated by Temba, whereas wages received ranged from R6,500 to R1,500 per month for interns in the Expanded Public Works Programme, which is a government job creation scheme.<sup>15</sup> What is considered enough money is not set against a poverty line, a prescribed minimum wage, the reservation wage or any objective measure of relative well-being. The decision to accept wages offered is not strictly a matter of economic rationality or calculation, but is also subjective and circumstantial.

In summary, these accounts illustrate the attitudes, and cognitive and affective evaluations (Crano & Prislin, 2006) involved in deciding what are satisfactory wages. For Nomlanga it involves hope and anticipation of economic betterment. For Temba and Buhle it is personal aspiration, and for Zintle and Tembeka it is worry about having nothing at all. Yet, along with this, the same study participants say that sometimes the work is just not worth the effort and they quit without having a job to go to, while at other times they feel ‘it is better than staying at home and doing nothing.’ Only Fezile has not left a job voluntarily without having a job to go to. His employer dismissed him. So what, in the context of employment insecurity and earning variability, leads the young adults in this study to quit employment without having a job to go to?

In answer to this question, we identify flux and uncertainty in employment and low wage earnings as two interrelated contributing factors. The research also

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<sup>13</sup>Wage Indicator Foundation. (n.d.) *Minimum Wages for Wholesale and Retail Sector*. Retrieved from

[https://www.mywage.co.za/main/salary/minimum-wages/archive/1?mwf\\_id=minimum-wages-in-wholesale-and-retail-sector-february-1-2014-to-january-31-2015](https://www.mywage.co.za/main/salary/minimum-wages/archive/1?mwf_id=minimum-wages-in-wholesale-and-retail-sector-february-1-2014-to-january-31-2015)

<sup>14</sup>...the lowest wage individuals [Youth] will accept work’ (Lilenstein & Seekings, 2017: 6).

<sup>15</sup>Western Cape Government. *Expanded Public Works Programme*. Retrieved from <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/general-publication/expanded-public-works-programme-epwp>

points to the extent that support from family household members who earn or who receive government social welfare grants is a factor.

### **3.4 The irrationality of quitting employment**

Highly intermittent employment and fluctuating earnings find the greatest frequency in the instances of Aphiwe and Lulama, who both worked on contract through labour brokers. Their response to the conditions and uncertainties of employment, sourced through labour brokers, is pragmatic. They readily move from one job to another, seeking an extra R100, adjusting to a difference between weekly wages earned and transport costs, which Aphiwe considers to be too high in relation to wages. In her words:

I have to take a bus which a week costs R100 a ticket, so that didn't make sense for me so I decided to quit [and] I went back to Capacity, [to] look for other sites. I had worked in Truworths Distribution Centre and ... I was in a lot of places ... because when you see that this site is not good for you because you're spending a lot on transport and then at the end of the week you get paid peanuts, you come to the office and look for another one, so that was what was happening. I would last for two months in the other place and maybe go back to the office again and look for another site, so that was it, I worked in many places. At I&J [fish trading company] I couldn't survive the cold, so it was not for me.

Most of Aphiwe's contracts were terminated at short notice by the employer; this required her to go back to the employment pool and wait for another opportunity to earn. She explains that, 'At times I would leave before my contract even expires.' She would quit suddenly without having a job to go to, knowing she would eventually be placed in another post, hopefully a better paying one or one with lower transport costs. Aphiwe complains about unpredictable wages:

Sometimes they would phone me but then I say no, this is a waste of time because I was earning R500 per week and now they will call me for two days or three days and that does not even reach R300.

In addition, deductions are sometimes made which she does not feel she can question. She sometimes feels racially victimised and claims higher paying jobs are given 'to the coloured girls' and that securing a job was sometimes conditional on someone 'liking you.' According to her, 'there may be someone attracted to you then you can be lucky...and so, exploitation.' Aphiwe's employment insecurity includes a number of conditions: rapid changes in jobs;

the short and unpredictable duration of contracts and a related instability in the workplace; the type of work, and the level of effort and status involved; the unreliability of wages earned; and the uncertainty about what one must do to secure and keep the job, not to mention the negative feelings related to racial victimisation and sexual harassment. But how much she gets paid is a powerful determinant of her choice to work.

Overall, the situation as portrayed by Aphiwe's responses is one of mutual indifference between worker and employer. It shows an attitude of choosiness by the worker toward employment, registered by the high level of churn<sup>16</sup> and by labour market mobility as discussed in the literature (Essers, 2016; Ingle & Mlatsheni, 2017; Kerr, 2018). Aphiwe's response, however, is pragmatic and thoughtful of her situation. She displays an agency and rationality borne out of concern about the value of her earnings vis-à-vis what she needs for herself and her child.

Similarly, Lulama worked for a labour broker for a short period between 2011 and 2012. She earned R900 for a night shift and R500 for a day shift, and so, depending on what was available, her daily and weekly earnings constantly changed. She then opted to go for training, first as an electrician and then as a forklift driver, but completed neither. The combination of a feisty and impatient character, relative financial security at home, and her reactions to sexual harassment in the workplace marks her volatile relationship with the labour market.

Nobomi earned R2,500 per month in 2009 but had to rise at 5:00 am to get to work on time and spend R500 of her salary on transport each month. In 2010 she took up employment in Khayelitsha for slightly less but said that 'it was better. I did not have to pay for transport.' For these women, the decision to remain in employment involves a continuous evaluation of wages earned, net of costs. They are not merely the subjects of a low wage non-standard employment business model or of the labour market structure of temporary employment or of adverse economic conditions.

### **3.5 On the meaning of employment and earning money**

Flux and insecurity of employment, and low wage earning in relation to domestic obligations and personal progress constitute the core structure of the

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<sup>16</sup>The churn was confirmed anecdotally at a Harambee work placement event in Cape Town in February 2016 by a representative of Woolworths, a high-end consumer goods retailer. She referred to a figure of 36% youth unemployment in Cape Town and 32% staff turnaround among those recruited as entry level employees. She also mentioned a R2,500 per month entry level wage.



labour market weighing in on personal and domestic life. Voluntary quitting, as a key signifier of the labour market from the point of view of the young adults in this case study, demonstrates a calculated, even tactical, act of empowerment based on seeking a marginal increase in take-home pay, better working conditions and greater convenience. It demonstrates a rationality involving aspiration as a cognitive-affective judgement for personal economic betterment, which is inherently social as it involves family and community. Quitting is also plausible as an expression of frustrated aspiration for upward mobility and social status. In addition, 'the money is not enough' as a reason to leave employment voluntarily is linked to the fact that most of the participants have their household to fall back on when unemployed.

Moreover, work may also not be worth the effort because of the status that employment confers on the young adults, both men and women, in the household: employment turns the individual from receiver of support to reluctant provider. Nomlanga tells the story of someone, a hypothetical young man who is working as a flagman (as Nomlanga himself did for a short period). He is in the sun all day, he says. He must get up early and get home late and on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the month he gets his wages but by the end of the first week of the next month he has nothing, but he must carry on working. He has given his money 'to this one and that one' and he ends up with nothing. Nomlanga's point is that work can be hard labour, difficult and physically arduous, and if the benefits for himself are effectively denied by the financial responsibility he feels to give financial support to 'this one and that one,' he wonders whether being employed is worth the effort. Along these lines, Temba comments on young men's response to hard work:

When you're in construction — all of that brick working ... you get hard jobs. So, they [referring to young men] just give up, especially when winter comes. Or they will work one day, the next day they are off sick, they're not sick, they just act sick, because they don't like working there, you see.

This attitude suggests an aversion to hard work indicating either a lack of motivation or an understandable dislike for tedious menial labour. This interpretation of aversion to hard work recalls the attitudes of the 1950s apartheid-era officials and businesspeople who saw job choosiness among section 10 (1)a and b workers, as designated by the apartheid Native (Urban Areas) Act, as a matter of idleness (Posel, 1991). Here we suggest simply that low wages are an insufficient reward for the effort expended.

And so, the job choosiness of Aphiwe and nine others involves a tense evaluative encounter with the net value of temporary employment, their relative dependence on their household, and the material and emotional consequences employment involves. This study argues that aspiration, defined as the social

grounding of personal desire (Ray, 2003), is a key factor in explaining job choosiness and thus at least some of the churn in the labour market. Scholarly work referenced below asserts that aspiration is a matter of perceptions of relative standing in comparison of self, inter-temporally and socially, with others in the lifeworld of the subjects.

Finally, the conversations with the participants show that they feel dissatisfied and anxious about their economic position and status, compared to where they feel they should be; about having or not having money; and about their economic progress. Following the work of Posel and Casale (2011), the study participants' perceptions of their relative social standing would have a greater effect on their feelings of well-being than their actual position on the income distribution would have. Furthermore, durable goods, especially what Hodkinson and Visser (2013) refer to as positional goods, may be more important signifiers of relative well-being for young adults than social comparison of earnings with neighbours. Temba's comparison of his own circumstances with a friend's circumstances points to the quality of his dissatisfaction. Access to the positional good of a car is central in his comparison between families he believes were at the start equal. Tones of resentment, jealousy and frustrated aspiration may be read in the sentiment of unhappiness:

We find it difficult because now we are growing [up] with other kids [whose] families can afford things. Within a month or maybe within a couple of months they will be able to buy a car because their parents will support [them]. There is a friend of mine, my best friend, we grew up together, but now in life...he is much better off than me... because he didn't [have to] support his family and whenever he was stuck in life his family was always there to support him. We had the same life, it's just a different family.

In Temba's terms a dependent poor family is cause for an absence of economic progress; progress itself, as signified by the positional good of the car, is a function of familial means and support. Moreover, growing up alongside those who are better off is difficult. It produces feelings of unfulfilled desire and negative subjective well-being. Tembeka, for example, compares herself with other women her age and their possession of positional things — a car, marriage, a house — comparisons that produce feelings of anxiety:

There's competition out there, you know. If I see another woman the same age as me driving a car, that's a pressure, because I think at this age I should be having my own car. Others are married, they've got houses, they've got cars, they're working, and you look at stuff like that and you just think time is passing

by. You're getting old, then you are still here. So, there's pressure.

## 4. Integrating context, prevalence and findings

This section engages with themes that appear from the research findings, with selected quantitative economic and sociological scholarship, and with statistical information. The engagement reveals both a measure of the extent of temporary employment enumerated in the national statistics and a wider prevalence of the (subjective) effects of employment and earning described above. We find that the experience of employment intermittency relates to churn in the labour market and to the phenomenon of quitting employment without having alternative employment to go to. Review and analysis of the phenomenon of volatile earnings (Ranchhod, 2013) in the South African labour market indicates its contribution to sentiments of dissatisfaction. These sentiments of dissatisfaction, expressed in the refrain that 'the money is not enough,' relate to meeting familial obligations and to (not) realising an aspired-to level of economic progress and subjective well-being. The attitudes of the young adults constitute cognitive-affective evaluations of the factors producing an aspiration, resulting from an aspirational gap as defined by Ray (2003).

Turning to the matter of working life, the first experience out of school for the study participants is a slow, unsteady and interrupted transition into employment,<sup>17</sup> setting a context of expectations regarding the world of work. This slow start varied from a few months to four years but was usually between one and two years. Youth in South Africa find it 'exceptionally difficult to find their first job' (Ingle & Mlatsheni, 2017: 13). This lack of experience on the part of work seekers, and employer perceptions are attributed to low levels of education (Mlatsheni & Rospabé, 2002). Successful job searching, however, also depends on an availability of employment and the kinds of jobs available, as well as the distance to work (Kingdon & Knight, 2000). There is also support for the view that the prevalence of high unemployment among youth, or of long periods out of employment, may discourage them from actively seeking employment (Kingdon & Knight, 2000). Conversations with the study participants suggest that uncertainty regarding employment and the frequent changes in and out of casual or short-term contract employment may also discourage job seeking, at least for short periods, though there is no clear evidence of this in the study.

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<sup>17</sup>The percentage of those in the labour force between the ages of 21 to 25 that are employed more than doubles to 40% at the age of 25 and rises further to 62% by the age of 29. This is the highest rate achieved among youth (Ingle & Mlatsheni, 2017).

Any study of the experience of money for young adults must be contextualised in relation to a very high youth unemployment rate. While youth unemployment is not an exclusively South African phenomenon, South African levels present a crisis. Lilenstein and Seekings (2017:2), referring to an International Labour Organization report (International Labour Organization, 2014), note an ‘unprecedented surge’ in youth unemployment globally since 2007. South Africa registered an unemployment rate of 49% for youth 15 to 25<sup>18</sup> years, using the official or strict measure of unemployment, and 64% using the broad measure which includes discouraged workers.<sup>19</sup> The official unemployment rate for young adults between 25 and 29 years was 32.5% for men and 40.1% for women, reducing to 24.8% and 29.7% for men and women respectively in the age group 30 to 35 years (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2015). Moreover, the prospect of unemployment is ever-present, and employment is increasingly temporary and uncertain (StatsSA, 2015).

In this regard, the official StatsSA definition of employment is notable as it includes those on short-term contracts, in casual employment and in informal self-employment. Bhorat, Lilenstein, Oosthuizen and Thornton (2016) consider this group to be those in ‘vulnerable employment.’

The pattern of casual or short-term fixed-term contract employment, temporariness, and uncertainty as evidenced in the case study is a well-recognised and documented feature of the South African labour market. National statistics of the national and provincial labour market for youth counted 19.7 million youth<sup>20</sup> of working age in 2015, with nearly 10 million economically active, as both employed and unemployed. Of these, about 6.25 million were officially counted as employed: 4.4 million in the formal sector, the rest (1.85 million) in the informal sector, in agriculture and working in private households, including anyone employed in their own home for at least one hour in the week prior to the labour market survey. About half of those with formal sector employment were on permanent contract, and another 27% were on contracts of undetermined duration. The rest were on contracts of limited or fixed duration. That means that nearly 3.2 million youth (1.32 limited employment contract and 1.85 not in formal sector employment), or nearly half of those who were counted as employed, may have been earning intermittently; another 3.7 million were simply unemployed<sup>21</sup> (StatsSA, 2015). Furthermore,

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<sup>18</sup>The International Labour Organization classification of youth.

<sup>19</sup> Discouraged workers are those who are determined to be Not Economically Active (NEA) ‘...who wanted to work but did not try to find work or start a business because they believed that there were no jobs available in their area, or were unable to find jobs requiring their skills, or they had lost hope of finding any kind of work’ (StatsSA, 2015: 2).

<sup>20</sup>15 - 35 years of age.

<sup>21</sup>As referred to by StatsSA (StatsSA, 2015).

permanent employment decreased between 2008 and 2015 and the number of young adults in contract employment of fixed duration rose by nearly 6% over the same period (StatsSA, 2015).

Among Black African young adults who were economically active in 2015, about 36% were in a state of churn<sup>22</sup> (Ingle & Mlatsheni, 2017). Kerr (2018) investigated the phenomenon among those whose employers pay income tax, as opposed to those who are less formally employed. He used data from SARS which includes 62% of those who are employed. Measured as the proportion of worker flows over and above job reallocation by firms, churn is considered to be high, at between 54% to 58% of worker flows in each year, between 2011 and 2014 (Kerr, 2018), excluding the public sector. In addition, firms that pay lower wages have higher churn rates. In 2014, worker flow rates by median monthly earnings quintiles show that there were nearly 83% in the lowest quintile and about 30% in the 5<sup>th</sup> quintile (Kerr, 2018).

Voluntary quitting must, logically, have a part in the phenomenon of churn. Kingdon and Knight find that ‘on average less than a quarter of those unemployed persons who previously worked had quit work ‘voluntarily’ rather than because of sacking’ (Kingdon & Knight, 2000: 5). They showed that among those who quit voluntarily are the young, the highly educated, women and Whites. They argue that ‘the cost of voluntary quitting into unemployment is a function of the cost of being unemployed’ (Kingdon & Knight, 2000: 6) and depends on the income earned while in employment and on the extent of one’s financial commitments. They argue that the young would have lower income loss due to the support of their families when unemployed. The extent of voluntary quitting noted there is consistent with the findings of this research and so is their argument that the young have less income loss due to family support. This study adds that the same people who quit employment voluntarily will sometimes accept wages well below the wage they aspire to. Moreover, this study has argued that the material and emotional effects of the intermittency of the respondents’ employment and fluctuating wages play a part in quitting.

Turning to the literature on wage earnings, notwithstanding the under-reporting of wages earned (Seekings, 2016) and the unreliability of wage data for purposes of modelling for longer than 10 years (Wittenberg, 2014), the wage trend in the services sector, which is the main sector in which the research

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<sup>22</sup>For purposes of comparison between groups according to their employment or unemployment persistence, Ingle and Mlatsheni (2017) separate those who were in the labour force in at least three out of the four waves of NIDS into three groups: those who were employed in at least three waves (persistently employed); those who were unemployed in at least three waves (persistently unemployed); and those who were in the labour force in at least three waves but were not employed or unemployed in more than two waves (neither persistently employed nor persistently unemployed) and were thus in a state of churn.

participants have been employed, has shown real growth (Finn, 2015; Wittenberg, 2014). Real mean wages in the services sector at April 2015 prices rose to R11,435 per month between 2003 and 2012, although median wages were lower at R6,241 per month. Finn (2015) concludes that wages increased more rapidly at the top end of the wages earned, which is a trend confirmed by Wittenberg (2014).

Regarding wage earning, Ranchhod (2013) defines earnings volatility as the phenomenon of transitory earnings variation or changeability of employment together with fluctuating earnings. His analysis is of the average earnings volatility of individuals in relation to the average earnings volatility within the group. He found earnings volatility to be high over the four-year interval of three waves of NIDS data between 2008 and 2012. Moreover ‘the within-person standard deviation in earnings’ (Ranchhod, 2013:3) was between 50% and 66% of mean earnings. This he shows to be mostly due to movement into and out of employment.<sup>23</sup> Ranchhod’s (2013) finding corresponds with those recorded in labour market literature showing a generally high level of churn, labour mobility and employment volatility, particularly among younger members of the workforce and lower income, menial workers (Bassanini, Garnero, Marianna & Martin, 2010; Essers, 2016; Ingle & Mlatsheni, 2017; Kerr, 2018).

Ranchhod goes on to argue that earnings volatility may be contributing to income inequality. In support of this argument, he refers to the highly cited survey by Gottschalk, Moffitt, Katz and Dickens (1994). Ranchhod illustrates logically that ‘earnings volatility is intrinsically related to economic mobility, arguing that (upward) economic mobility is likely to reduce the level of inequality measured over a longer time horizon’ (Ranchhod, 2013:5). Logically, therefore, a high level of employment volatility would restrain the study participants’ economic mobility, and impact negatively on their perceptions of well-being over time. This provides one explanation for the oft heard sentiment that ‘the money is not enough,’ considered to be an expression of unhappiness or negative subjective well-being.

On the other hand, Finn and Leibbrandt examine whether (upward) economic mobility serves to ‘equalise or dis-equalise longer-term incomes in South Africa’ (Finn & Leibbrandt, 2013:2). Using an objective measure of mobility,<sup>24</sup> they find, surprisingly in light of the above logic, that there had been a high level of income mobility in South Africa by international standards, particularly

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<sup>23</sup>In this study, Ranchhod is concerned with the average volatility of individuals within a group. He makes use of individual level data to first estimate the volatility of earnings for individuals in his sample of the group and then calculate the average volatility within the group.

<sup>24</sup>Defined as an ‘individual’s changing position relative to others in the distribution of income’ (Finn & Leibbrandt, 2013: 2).

at the lower end of income distribution. Nonetheless, it had a small effect on equalisation over the five years of the three NIDS waves, from 2008 to 2013.<sup>25</sup> Upward income mobility may be high at the lower end of the income distribution but, according to Bookwalter and Dalenberg (2004), if increases in income or household expenditure are modest, this adds little to perceptions of well-being.

Regarding perceptions of well-being, Posel and Casale (2011) looked at individuals' perceptions of where they rank in the income distribution and found that, among the richest third of the South African population, the objective measure of relative status, i.e., their relative position on the income distribution, was between four and five times higher than their perceived standing. The difference was greatest among the Black African population. Almost 40% of those in the top third and nearly 60% of those in the middle believed they ranked among the poorest (Posel & Casale, 2011). Posel and Casale concluded that the effect that 'feelings of relative deprivation have on satisfaction with life resonates strongly in a country such as South Africa, which has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world' (Posel & Casale, 2011: 197). By this, they imply that income inequality may be a reason for the difference between perceived and actual relative economic standing. Another reason may be that aspirations far exceed actual earnings.

Posel and Casale (2011) also find that, in South Africa, an individual's perception of their relative position in their neighbourhood has a far larger effect on their subjective well-being than their actual position. In this regard, Hodkinson and Visser (2013) concluded that comparison of an individual's per capita household income with the mean household income of the neighbourhood had no impact on young adults' perceptions of relative standing, but relative consumption of durable goods, including positional goods (such as a television or a vehicle), did. It impacted on interpersonal social comparison and thereby on their subjective well-being (Posel & Casale, 2011; Hodkinson & Visser, 2013). Evidently, the visible nature of so-called positional goods is more important for young adults in judging the relative welfare of their households than what they earn (Carlsson, Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson, 2007).

Overall, the literature on relative standing finds that positions on an actual income distribution have little bearing on perceptions of subjective well-being. The perceptions of the research participants of their subjective well-being are practically indifferent to their relative position on the income distribution. The sentiment in the case study that 'the money is not enough' is clearly an

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<sup>25</sup>The reason given for this is the skewed income distribution in South Africa, which means that a small incremental increase at the lower quintiles of the income distribution may result in mobility into a higher quintile. Equally, a large loss at the highest quintile may not register a drop to a lower quintile.

expression of a negative subjective well-being, of feeling dissatisfied with economic progress, and of not having enough money to spend on oneself. It is also an expression of aspiration.

The descriptive account, contextualisation and analysis of the finding set out above leads to the following critique and way of thinking about the conditions of the case study.

## **5. Conclusions and theoretical reflections**

First, the evidence offers a critique of the standard categories of employment status in official statistics, which in one way or another inform state policy and business-economic decisions. The subjective lived experience sketched out and reflected upon above is important to bring to light because of the 6.25 million South African young adults ('youth') counted as employed in 2015, nearly 3.2 million of whom would have been only intermittently employed, mainly earning low wages that fluctuate from job to job. Yet economic academic studies and public and policy discourse seldom refer to partial and occasional employment as a separate category of employment status despite the specificity of its consequences in the lifeworlds of millions of people, predominantly young adults whose intermittent employment regularly leaves them with almost no money at all and dependent on household support. They are simply categorised as *employed*.

A consequence of this assembly of employment sub-categories under the official *employed* category is that it obscures the actual employment conditions and therefore the income/expenditure conditions of millions of people. In addition, the subjective effects of churn remain poorly understood, if understood at all. It may be too readily assumed that 'the employed are okay,' that they have, for example, access to retail and other credit and that their financial circumstances are manageable. Yet, as shown here, irregular partial employment poses enormous challenges to the rational management of one's finances and to maintaining self-respect as a member of a family and as a social peer. Never having quite enough money in a highly competitive social environment means the individual is always destabilised in relation with their aspirations to 'becoming someone.' The research suggests that irregular contract and casualised employment, including informal sector employment and domestic labour, deserves a status of its own in official statistics, and not a sub-set of the Employment category. It deserves such a status especially because of the significance of its social and economic impact, not to speak of the psychological stresses on the individual and the collective, including the myriad of anti-social behaviour involving disrespect for social norms and statutory laws, which we do not touch on in this study.



Further, this study reveals the inherent limitations of quantitative analysis of statistical labour market data sets. At best, this analysis of correlations and trends yields insights into structural relationships between economic and social factors. These abstractly conceived relations entail effects and meaning in the lived experience of everyday social life. The economic literature analysis thus meets a gap, namely the dynamic lived or subjective dimension of employment and unemployment. In consequence, we are directed toward asking what, in fact, makes up ‘economic life.’ Does ‘the economy’ simply reference the interplay of structural factors distant from social life, or might a useful way of thinking about economy lie in extending the term to incorporate the meaning of money in social being? While the paper cannot fully address this question, it opens a rational debate on what is meant by ‘the economy’ and proposes an improved method of analysis of that phenomenon within the concept of moral economy.

Theoretically the paper is framed in terms of the Polanyian notion of ‘embeddedness’ of the economy within social relations. The paper adds to current scholarship a case demonstrating extant structural conditions of variable low-wage and unreliable employment, which are, in the words of Palomera and Vetta, ‘metabolized’ (Palomera & Vetta, 2016: 414) in the domestic domain of young adult workers and their peer milieu of competitive sociability, where these young adults live out, as it were, the consequences of formations over which they have no control. These fields ‘constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices’ (*ibid.*, 2016: 414) are what Palomera and Vetta refer to as moral economies.

Theoretically, the paper concludes that these moral economies, in metabolising the structural labour market conditions, situates monetary exchanges — reciprocal, (re)distributional and trade (Polanyi, 1957) — in a set of relational acts by which financial contributions embed generational and social reproductive themes that belong to both local and national economic contexts.

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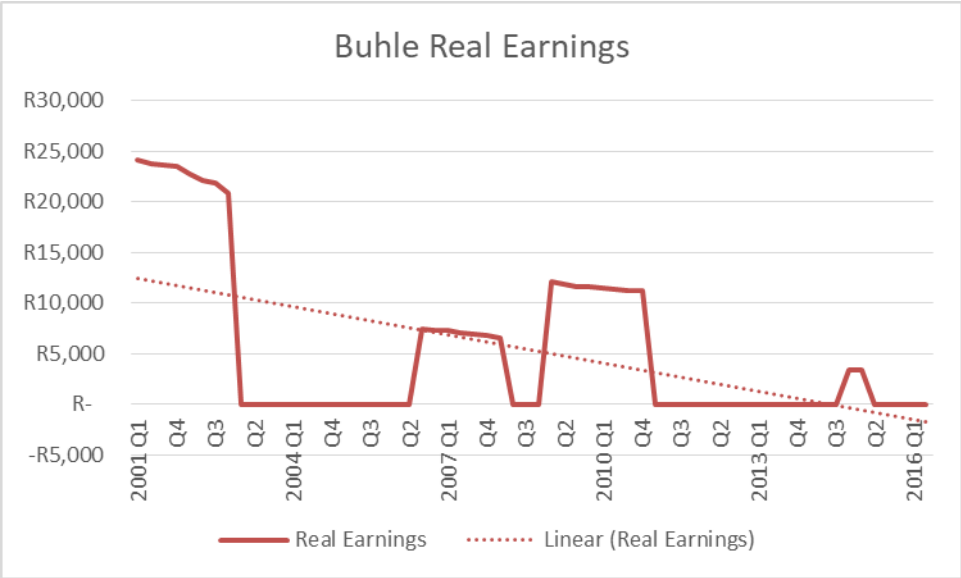
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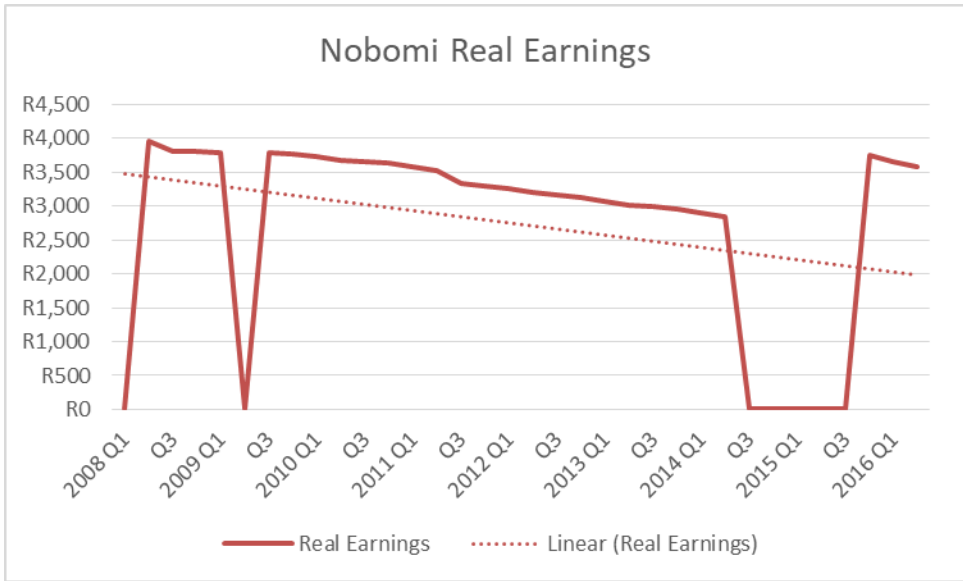
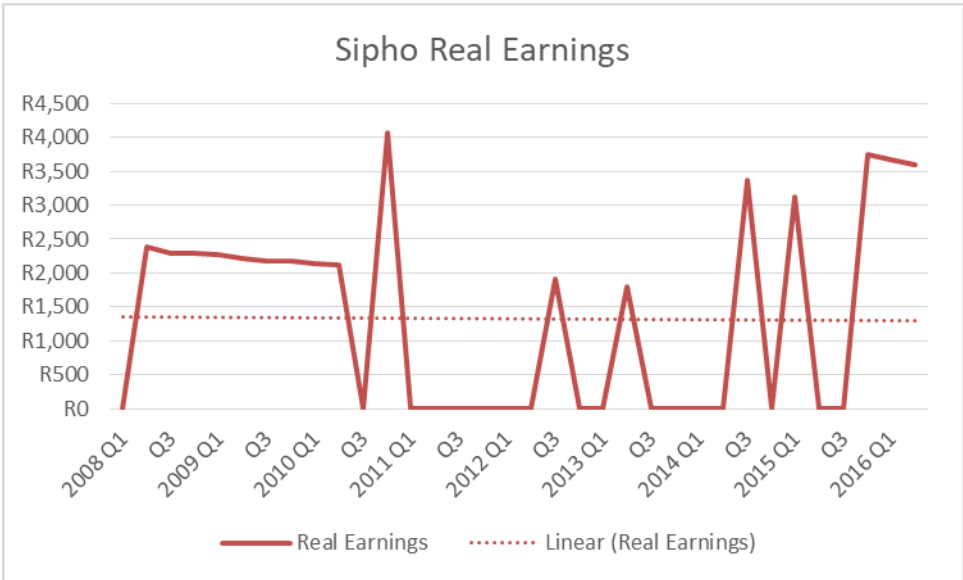
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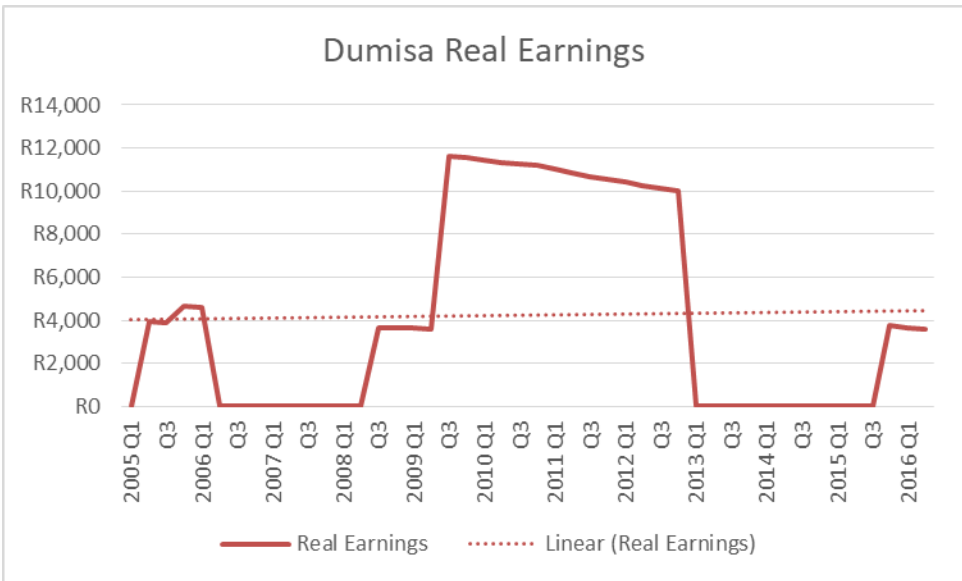
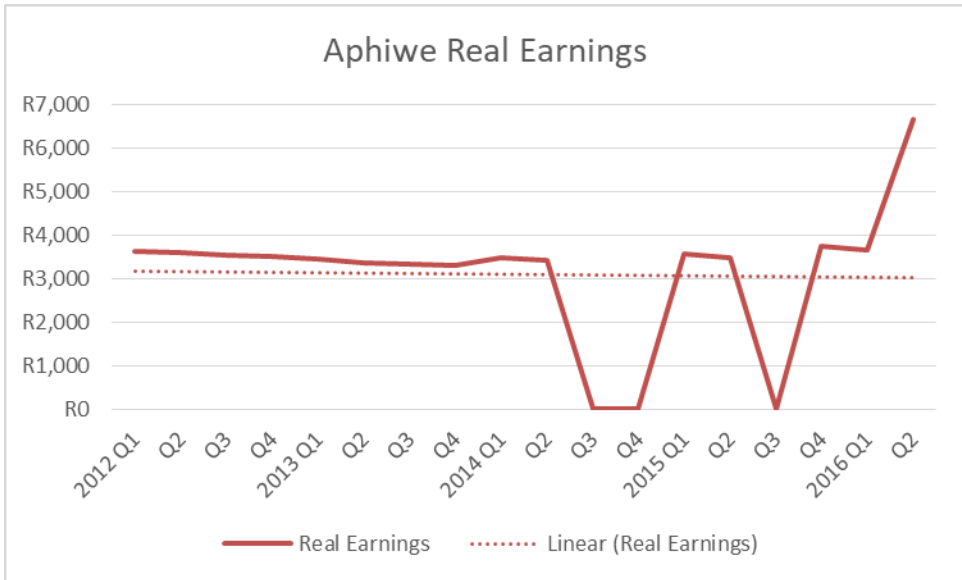
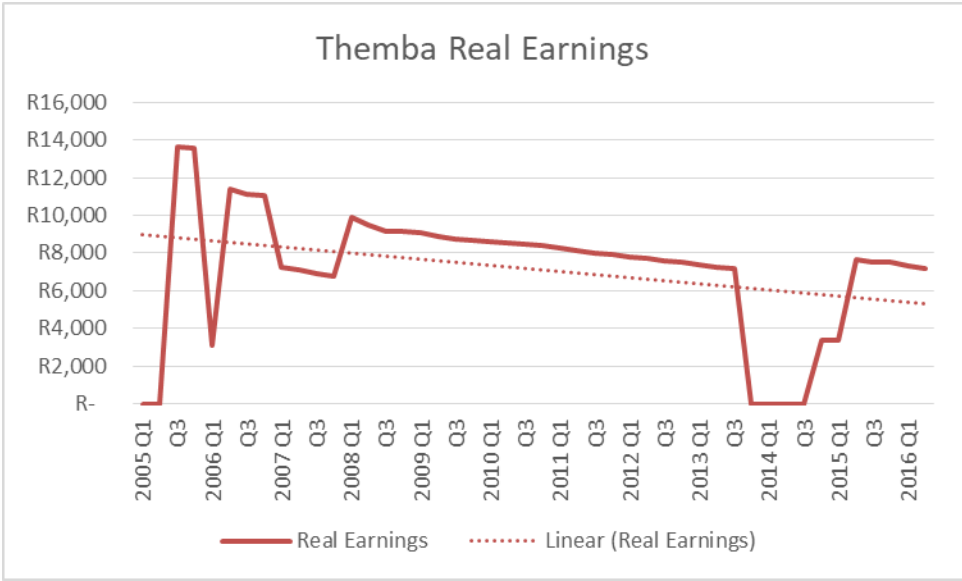
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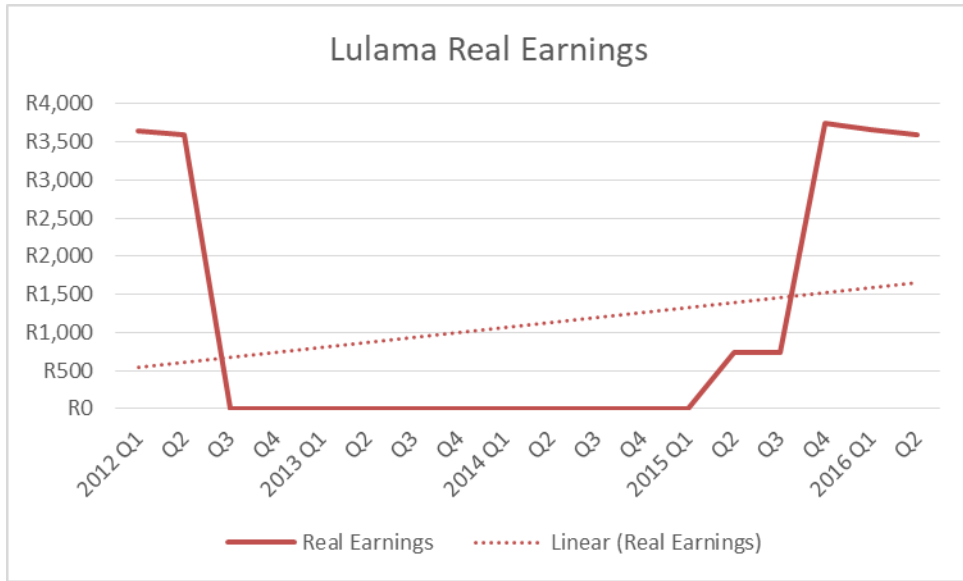
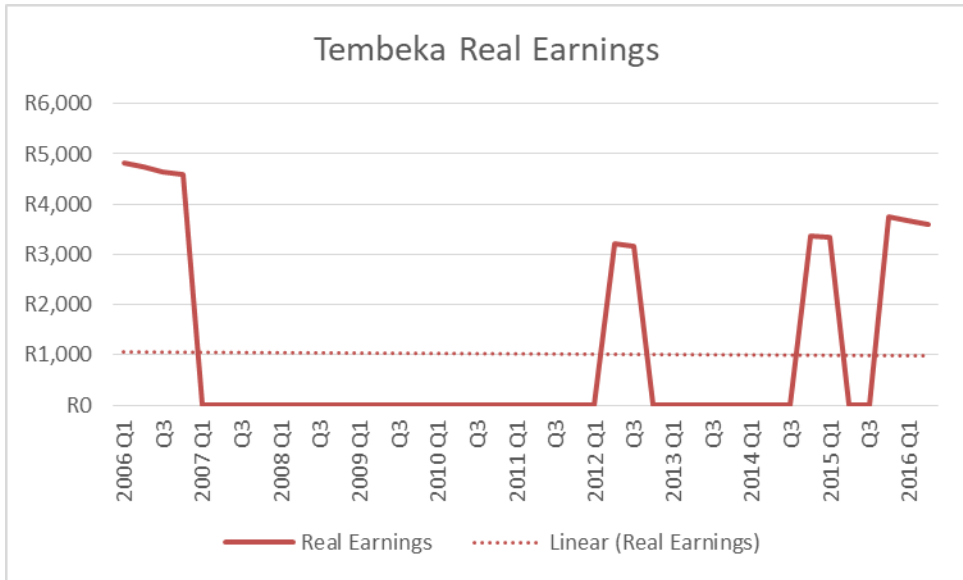
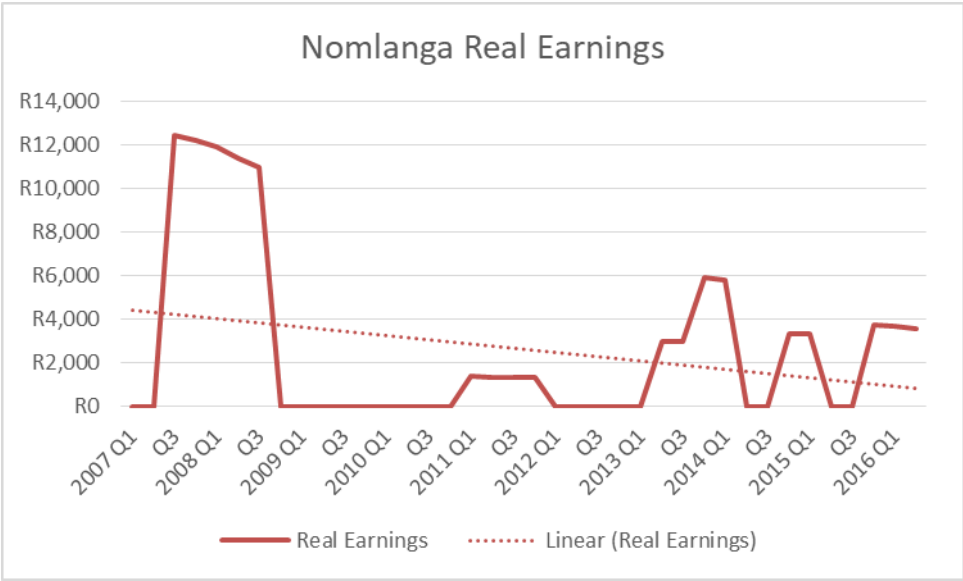
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# Appendix A: Employment trends by age (in descending order)

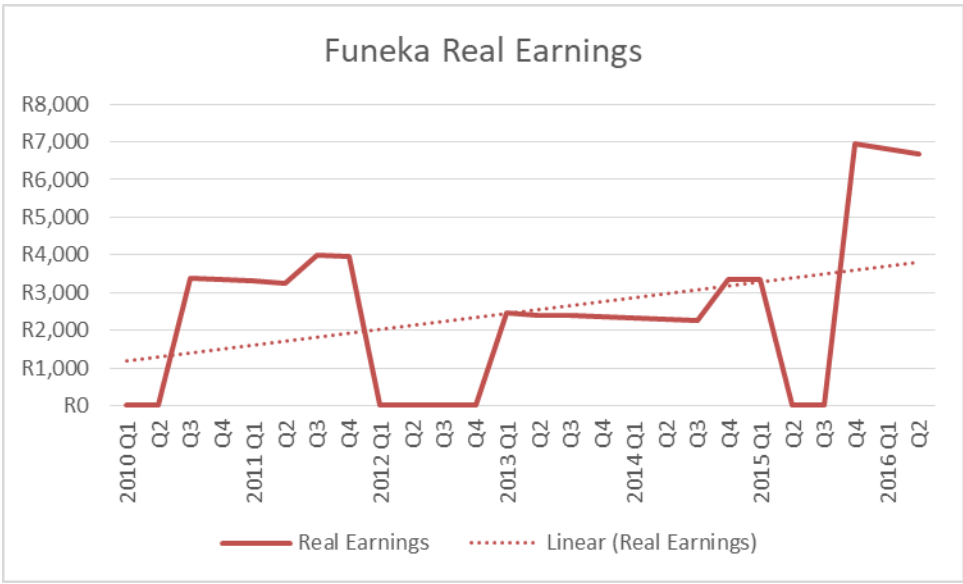












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